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Nikolai Medtner's *Fairy Tales* as Shakespearean Adaptation

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Honors Project

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*The following paper was completed to partially fulfill the requirements of an Honors Project at Bowling Green State University. It is to be presented in conjunction with a performance of Nikolai Medtner's pieces, Ophelia's Song, Op. 14. No. 1, and King Lear, Op. 35 No. 4. The entire lecture recital will serve to completely satisfy the requirements of an Honors Project.*

## **I. Introduction**

“No one tells us stories like Kolya!” said Sergei Rachmaninoff, speaking about Nikolai Medtner’s collection of *Skazki*, or *Fairy Tales*, short pieces written for solo piano. As demonstrated by Rachmaninoff’s response, the *Fairy Tales* (or *Skazki* in the original Russian) were quite popular when they were written in the early twentieth century; however, the pieces later became less popular. Pianists neglected Medtner’s music for other 19<sup>th</sup> century composers who composed pieces with the stylistic trademarks of the romantic period as well as for other early 20<sup>th</sup> century composers who composed music in a more modern style. In recent years though, some performers and musicologists have begun to study Medtner’s pieces once again. Because the pieces have been examined from only musicological or performance perspectives, analysis of the pieces has been limited to the field of music.

Yet, the pieces can be viewed through a different lens-- that of literary theory. This is possible because the *Fairy Tales* are not self-contained pieces of music; rather, they are programmatic pieces. Programmatic pieces invoke extra-musical connections, and, in this case, those connections are literary. Throughout his collection of *Skazki* (which consists of thirty-eight pieces) Medtner uses several various literary inspirations: for example, his Opus 14 no. 2 is titled *March of the Paladin*, named for the Paladin

soldiers from the *Chanson de Roland*. The *Fairy Tales* that I intend to focus on take their inspiration from Shakespeare's plays. Opus 14 no. 1 is titled *Ophelia's Song*, while Opus 35 No. 4, though untitled, is referred to as *King Lear* because it is introduced with a short quote from the play of the same title ("Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!").

In this paper, I ask the questions, "Are Nikolai Medtner's pieces adaptation? And, if so, what kind of adaptation are they?" First, I will explore the context of the pieces by providing biographical information about Nikolai Medtner as well as background information about the musical context in which the pieces were written. The background information will allow us to better understand Medtner's compositional practices so that one may be better able to understand the pieces and then analyze them. Then, in order to determine whether the pieces are adaptation, I will examine the *Fairy Tales* using Linda Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation*. Because she spends extensive time defining adaptation, her theory is ideal to determine whether Medtner's pieces are adaptation. Finally, to determine what kind of adaptation Medtner's pieces are, I will examine Medtner's writings in his book *The Muse and the Fashion* as well as provide a brief music theory analysis of the compositions. Through this methodology, I combine the emphasis on authorial intention present in Intentionalist criticism and the close reading present in New Criticism.

Considering Medtner's pieces with these lenses (Hutcheon's theory, Intentionalism, and New Criticism) is important to ongoing academic discussion for three different reasons. Firstly, such an analysis provides more criticism for pieces that are just recently coming in to the popular repertoire, adding to current nascent scholarship and contributing to a better understanding Medtner's role in the history of music and of the

arts in general. Also, adaptation theory has often focused on textual works and seldom studied non-verbal music as adaptation. By analyzing Medtner's *Skazki* vis á vis adaptation, I will expand the current realm of adaptation theory to the field of music, allowing theorists to apply literary theory to art works that are not explicitly textual. Finally, the incorporation of both music theory and literary theory provides a new interdisciplinary approach to analysis. This new approach can broaden the field of musicology by allowing musicologists to examine programmatic pieces using not only historical and theoretical vocabulary, but also the vocabulary of adaptation theory. Thus, it is important to consider whether Medtner's *Fairy Tales* are adaptations because if they can be regarded as forms of literary adaptation, both the fields of musicology and literary theory could be significantly broadened beyond their current scopes, allowing for a more unified approach to studying various artistic mediums.

## II. Contextual Information

Nikolai Medtner was born in 1880 in Moscow (Martyn 2). Combining literature and music must have come naturally for him given his family background: his father took a great interest in philosophy, literature, and theatre, while his mother was a pianist and singer. Medtner was a musical prodigy who began playing piano at the age of six and studying at the Moscow Conservatory at age twelve (3, 4). Though trained as a concert pianist, he decided to become a composer soon after he graduated from the conservatory (13). His output overwhelmingly features piano music, including sonatas, concertos, and chamber works. He began writing his *Skazki* in 1904 and finished in 1929 (29, 195). Medtner later died in London in 1951 (259).

Though Medtner witnessed the beginning of twentieth century modernism in music, he preferred more conservative compositional styles. For example, he wrote to a young composer, “How can I accuse you of harmonic incoherence when so talentless a numbskull as Stravinsky is hailed as a ‘classic’, as the possessor of a ‘Mozartian genius’?” Clearly, many aspects of modern music greatly angered Medtner, and perhaps it is for this reason that he was so drawn to fairly short programmatic pieces, a style that became immensely popular in the Romantic period.

The Romantic Era (1825-1890) saw the rise of many styles, forms, and genres of music. Composers experimented with new tonality, forms like thematic transformation, and genres such as the symphonic poem or tone poem. One of the most popular genres of music was the programmatic piece, the popularity of which led to a heated dispute between late nineteenth century composers. Some aesthetes of the time period hailed music as an art form that could express emotions for which words are inadequate. Eduard Hanslick held this belief and wrote, “What kind of beauty is the beauty of a musical composition? It is a specifically musical kind of beauty. By this we understand a beauty that is self-contained and in no need of content form outside itself, that consists simply and solely of tones and their artistic combination” (736). Aesthetes like Hanslick believed that music should exist independently, to be interpreted solely by the listener. These art scholars prized pieces such as sonatas and symphonies. This kind of self-contained music became known as absolute music.

However, other romantic composers, such as Franz Liszt, disagreed. He wrote, “Through song there have always been combinations of music with literary or quasi-literary works; the present time seeks a union of the two which promises to become a

more intimate one than any that have offered themselves thus far” (736). Liszt believed that music should not exist independently but can and should draw from outside sources. He acted on this belief by writing pieces such as *Orpheus* and *Faust Symphony*. This kind of music that Liszt wrote and defended came to be known as programmatic music. It is in this latter category in which Medtner’s *Skazki* fall.

### III. Are Medtner’s *Fairy Tales* Adaptation?

However, did Medtner’s pieces achieve the unity between literature and music that Liszt spoke of? Can his pieces be rightfully referred to as adaptations rather than simply musical compositions? In Linda Hutcheon’s book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, she explores various qualities and definitions of adaptation. At one point she briefly describes adaptation as a “transcoding into a different set of contentions” (33). She elaborates on this definition by writing that

... seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular works or works.... Second, as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation.... Third, seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as repetition with variation. (8)

In the above quote Hutcheon explains that an adaptation is a work with three different qualities: first, an adaptation is “an acknowledge transposition of a recognizable other work or works” (7). An adaptation must be announced as an adaptation in order for the

audience to experience is palimpsestuously. Secondly, an adaptation is “a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” (8). Adapters must intentionally transcode a work into either another medium or another “set of contentions” (33). Accidental connections with other works do not qualify a work as adaptation. Finally, an adaptation is “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8). Adaptive works must have substantial length in order to exclude mere references from being considered adaptations. Thus, Hutcheon offers a brief yet concise definition of adaptation: “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art” (170).

According to Hutcheon’s description of an adaptation as “transcoding,” Medtner’s works should be considered adaptations. The pieces are certainly a “transcoding” from literature to music. Specifically, Opus 14 No. 1 and Opus 35 No. 4 transcode Shakespearean theatre to piano music. The *Skazki* also meet the other three qualities of adaptations. They are extended works rather than merely short musical quotations or suggestions (*Ophelia’s Song* is comprised of 86 measures and *King Lear* contains 122 measures). Also, the work’s connection with the Shakespearean text is announced at the beginning of the piece through the title. Because of such overt references to the source texts, one can easily conclude that Medtner intended to base his works on Shakespeare’s famous plays, which allows the pieces to meet the final criterion. Thus, the *Fairy Tales* fit all of Hutcheon’s requirements of adaptations.

However, Hutcheon also refers to other qualities that might be essential to adaptation, though she does not explicitly state them in the aforementioned definitions. One important concept Hutcheon mentions is that of the palimpsest. “Palimpsest” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning, “a manuscript or piece of writing



material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain” or “something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.” Hutcheon frequently uses the ideas of changing texts and of making room for new texts when discussing adaptations, especially when examining the audience’s experience. When engaging with an adaptation, the audience should experience “palimpsestuous intertextuality” (21), which Hutcheon defines earlier in her book as, “...what Roland Barthes called, not a ‘work,’ but a ‘text,’ a plural ‘stereophany of echoes, citations, and references’” (6). What separates an adaptation from an original work is its reference to a past work. Adaptations should be experienced as both independent and intimately connected with their original works.

The palimpsestuous quality of adaptations causes Hutcheon to question certain forms of art as adaptation. For example, she debates whether art exhibits are adaptations: “I am not convinced that the pleasure of the audience in this case relies on the ‘palimpsestuousness’ of the experience, on the oscillation between a past image and a present one. And, in the end, it is the audience who must experience the adaptation as adaptation” (172). Hutcheon believes it is crucial for an audience experiencing an adaptation to experience the work as a palimpsest, a work that occurs both in the present (through the adaptation) and in the past (through the original source). Without this kind of experience, Hutcheon seriously questions whether a work can truly be considered an adaptation.

Thus, the question of whether Medtner’s works display the kind of palimpsestic qualities that Hutcheon values is crucial. After all, the auditory and emotional experience that results from listening to the pieces can exist independently of the Shakespearean

texts. Listeners who are unaware of the titles of the pieces may have a very similar experience to the one Hutcheon describes when she considers those who attend art exhibits: the audience's experience is not palimpsestic. Yet, the emotional experience becomes richer when listeners are aware of the source text and of the characters and emotions therein.

Yet, the ability of the audience to experience a work as an independent entity need not contradict the palimpsestic nature of adaptations. While audience experience is certainly important when considering how a work functions, elsewhere in her book Hutcheon makes a necessary distinction between different audiences. A "knowing audience" is an audience that is familiar with the source text on which an adaptation is based, while an "unknowing" audience is unfamiliar with the source text. Hutcheon writes that, "to experience [a work] as an adaptation... we need to recognize it as such and to know its adapted text, thus allowing the latter to oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing" (121). Thus, it is only a knowing audience that can experience the work "as an adaptation."

However, Hutcheon implies that a work can be an adaptation even if an unknowing audience does not experience it as adaptation. She argues, "For an adaptation to be successful in its own right, it must be successful for both knowing and unknowing audiences" (121). An unknowing audience member must be able to enjoy a work even though he is unaware of the original source and does not experience the work as adaptation. Such a phenomenon does not discredit the work and disqualify it from being considered adaptation; rather, it merely means that the adaptation can be viewed independently and thus, in Hutcheon's opinion, is successful.

While confining himself to a non-verbal medium, Medtner alerted audiences to the palimpsestuous nature of his work as overtly as possible- through the titles of the pieces. Through the title, a “knowing audience” will quickly recognize the piece in connection with its source. Yet, an unknowing audience can also successfully experience the piece. Though an unknowing audience might not experience the *Skazki* as adaptations, the pieces’ ability to stand independently of their source is part of what makes them successful. Thus, Medtner’s pieces can be regarded as examples of adaptation and, in fact, successful adaptations that can stand both independently and interdependently with their source texts.

#### **IV. What Kind of Adaptation?**

Though one can affirmatively conclude that the *Fairy Tales* are adaptation, the question of what kind of adaptation remains. Hutcheon writes of adaptations by considering whether the work is “showing” (such as cinema or theatre), “telling” (such as literature or poetry), or “interacting” (such as videogame adaptations) (38). For example, she represents a film version of a novel as a transformative process of Telling → Showing. While this novel to film adaptation fits easily into Hutcheon’s paradigm, how do Medtner’s pieces fit?

Clearly the *Fairy Tales* are not “showing” or “interacting:” the audience does not actively participate nor are there any visuals. Thus, should the transformative process that Medtner’s pieces exemplify be represented as Telling → Telling? A comparison of the two art forms (writing and music) may help to answer this question. In Calvin S. Brown’s book *Music and Literature*, he writes, “Music and literature, then, are alike in that they

are arts presented through the sense of hearing, having their development in time, and hence requiring a good memory for their comprehension” (Brown 11). The experiences of viewing or reading Shakespeare’s plays and listening to Medtner’s pieces are similar in the sense that both art forms involve an aural unfolding over time. This promotes the categorization of Medtner’s pieces as Telling, though the source text is also Telling.

However, describing both Shakespeare’s works and Medtner’s music as “Telling” seems too simple. There are obvious differences between a play and a piano piece. Brown describes these differences between the two art forms by writing, “We have seen that both music and literature are presented to the intellect and the emotion by means of sound, the principal difference being that musical sound is used only for itself and the sounds of literature have eternal significance” (15). The sounds of music have self-contained meaning: the notes create emotions in relationship to other notes in the same piece. The experience is self-contained. In contrast, the sounds of literature, must reference outside ideas to have meaning: words refer to objects outside of the text.<sup>1</sup> In the case of this particular adaptation, the primary difference between the source text and the adaptation is the transcoding from one kind sound to another. Thus, it is true that Medtner does not transcode Shakespeare’s texts outside of the larger category of “Telling.” Rather, in his *Skazki*, Medtner adapts explicitly verbal telling to nonverbal telling.

While this may be one accurate way of expressing what kind of adaptation Medtner’s *Skazki* are, Medtner himself also wrote about various kinds of music; a

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction also explains the aforementioned dilemma of how Medtner’s pieces can be experienced independently; the use of notes instead of words lends itself to a self-contained art form that need not be associated with an original source

discussion of the categories he describes in his book *The Muse and The Fashion* can help to further illuminate a descriptive analysis of the *Fairy Tales*. In his book, Medtner discusses his view of programmatic music and defines the term in a more specific way than most musicologists do today:

Many are inclined to assign to the realm of program music just about every piece that has not a purely musical title (sonata, rondo, prelude), but one describing its character or mood (berceuse, reverie), or one which may even have been borrowed, for greater clarity, from some well known literary work. In reality, however, program music is only music in which the form itself and the contents are dictated and justified by a certain program or subject matter.... The poetic text may beget a purely musical song which flows along sometimes uniting itself with the text, but never forsaking its own musical bed. Or the same text may not beget any song, melody, or any musical form whatsoever; it may merely serve as a canvas for musical declamation or as an illustration of separate and mostly external points such as the trills of a nightingale, the rustle of the water, or the howling of the wind. The music of such songs, that is entirely guided by the text and has no self-sufficient musical sense or contents, naturally belongs to the domain of program music, since in writing it the musician, like a school boy, was merely taking down a dictation of the poetic text.

(124)

Here Medtner critiques the common definition of programmatic pieces that states that all pieces with extra-musical connections are programmatic. Conversely, Medtner believes

that only pieces which draw specific form and content from an extra-musical source are truly programmatic pieces. Pieces that simply draw inspiration from a source (perhaps portraying the emotions of a certain scene or using short references to different specific aspects of the scene) should not be included in this definition of programmatic in Medtner's opinion.

Medtner's terminology to describe the distinction between programmatic and non-programmatic music is not very practical for purposes of discussion, however, because he does not provide a name for the kind of music that others regard as programmatic music but he does not. Fortunately, Brown notices the same distinction and provides specific terms for each category: in the realm of programmatic music, he distinguishes between descriptive and narrative music (257). While narrative music "clearly depict[s] both the participants and their actions" in order to tell a story, descriptive music is "less literal pieces of program music which attempt . . . to present a general scene and its characteristic atmosphere" (257, 240). These terms reflect Medtner's musical philosophy: what Medtner would deem true programmatic music, Brown refers to as narrative music. Pieces that others would regard as programmatic music but Medtner would not, Brown refers to as descriptive. Because Brown's distinction is essentially the same as Medtner's, yet with clearer terminology, I will use Brown's language to continue to discuss what kind of adaptation Medtner's *Fairy Tales* are.

While I have previously sought to answer what kind of adaptation Medtner's *Fairy Tales* are by considering them in light of Hutcheon's distinctions, one can further describe the adaptive character of the pieces by examining them in conjunction with

Medtner and Brown's distinction between descriptive and narrative music. To which of the categories do the *Fairy Tales* belong? To answer this question, one must turn to the pieces themselves. For the purpose of brevity, I will focus on only *Ophelia's Song* and *King Lear*. By concluding to which category of programmatic pieces these two representative works belong, one can draw a general conclusion about the whole collection of pieces.

Firstly, is *Ophelia's Song* a narrative piece? If it is, its formal characteristics should conform to the form of the source. In this case, the source is the songs Ophelia sings in *Hamlet*, which appear in Act 4 Scene 5. The songs express Ophelia's emotions after she has gone mad and been rejected by Hamlet; the songs are limericks in iambic meter. If Medtner's piece is narrative, it should reflect this form. Firstly, the overall form of the piece is ABA form- it begins and ends with similar sections and has a contrasting section in the middle. This form is not found in the original text, however. Secondly, one must consider the original songs' iambic meter. At first glance, the musical piece seems to reflect this meter. The opening phrase begins on beat two and continues into the next measure through beat one. Because the stress of the phrase contains an unaccented second beat followed by a stressed first beat, the phrase contains the same pattern of unstressed-stressed that is an iambic foot. Even when Medtner begins to employ extended phrases (which span four measures) in the A section, he continues to begin the phrase on the second beat rather than the first. Because this iambic pattern is often found throughout the piece, one may tentatively conclude that perhaps the piece is somewhat narrative, drawing its form from the text itself. However, the iambic pattern is not present

throughout the B section or in the coda of the piece. Thus, there is not overwhelming evidence that *Ophelia's Song* is a narrative piece; yet, there is a suggestion that it may be.

The source text in *King Lear* is Lear's lines, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!". This line is from Act 3 Scene 1, after both Goneril and Reagan have locked King Lear out of their homes, leaving him and his servants outside as it storms. In his anger, Lear encourages the storm to rage all the more. The form of Medtner's composition is complex. If one observes the key changes as the official signifiers of sections, Medtner composed this work in ABA form as well. However, *King Lear* is significantly longer than *Ophelia's Song* and if one divides sections according to significant textural changes, the piece has approximately eight different sections. Regardless of how one views the form of the piece, however, it is clear that the form does directly reflect either the form of the quote or the play as a whole.

As with *Hamlet*, *King Lear* is written mostly in iambic pentameter. Unlike in *Ophelia's Song* the iambic foot or the pentameter is not present in the phrasing of the piece, which overall tends to emphasize the first and third beats (instead of the second or fourth, as it would if it were to sound iambic). Medtner also tends to alternate phrase length, including many long sequences (instead of a five bar or five beat phrase, as one might expect if the piece were to reflect pentameter). Yet, the piece does reflect its source by being rather monothematic (by using the same thematic material throughout the entirety of the piece). Perhaps this monothematicism is meant to portray an extended reflection on the short quote? As in *Ophelia's Song*, though there is some evidence that the work may be narrative, the evidence is rather dubious.



Can the pieces be classified more easily into the category of descriptive music, however? Firstly, *King Lear* certainly contains music symbols that remind listeners of the source text. Throughout the piece, the diatonic melodies are contrasted with highly chromatic sequential passages. The effect of this contrast is that it reminds listeners both of the character speaking the words (in the diatonic passages) and of the storm that is occurring (in the chromatic sequences). Additionally, Medtner uses the low register of the keyboard throughout the work. The technique of combining many low notes located at small intervals from one another and played at a very fast pace mimics the roaring sound of the thunder which Lear is addressing. Thus, both the range of the music as well as the contrasting diatonic and chromatic passages represent the “external factors” that Medtner argued should not immediately classify a piece as programmatic. Thus, to use Brown’s terminology, these musical references to external factors provide evidence that the pieces are descriptive.

*Ophelia’s Song* also fits much better under the classification of descriptive music. The key of the piece works to invoke the somber mood of Ophelia’s lines and to forewarn of her future death. Medtner achieves this effect by beginning and ending the piece in F Dorian (the key signature denotes F minor, yet the frequent use of D naturals creates the sense of Dorian mode); instead of modulating to the major V key (in this case, C major) in the B section, Medtner modulates to a minor v (C minor). The use of only minor keys throughout the piece emphasizes the persistent depression that Ophelia experiences toward the end of the play. Additionally, the use of Dorian mode rather than simply F minor makes the piece feel somber and frightening. By using Dorian mode, Medtner displaces the expected tonal center up a full step. Additionally, the mode may remind

listeners of medieval church music, which frequently used modes. The sense of sadness and hearkening back to religious music may be intended to foreshadow Ophelia's death. Additionally, the consistent use of slow eighth note chords contributes to the feeling that the piece is a funeral march. By using both mode and rhythm, Medtner elaborates on Ophelia's emotions and encourages listeners to feel her tragic effect of her death more strongly. By function in this way, Medtner's piece elaborates on certain characters' emotions and on individual scenes. Hence, the piece should be classified as descriptive.

## V. Conclusion

Medtner's *Skazki* had previously gained attention within only the field of music. Nevertheless, because the pieces overtly reference their source texts and can be experienced as palimpsestic works by knowing audiences, they can also be legitimately considered adaptations, and can be studied within the field of adaptation theory. If the realm of adaptation theory can be expanded to include Medtner's *Fairy Tales*, it follows that adaptation theory can and should explore other programmatic pieces. This is important because it explores the integrative possibilities of combining musicology and literary theory, thus providing new ways for musicians to study Medtner's pieces as well as for literary theorists to study art works of various degrees of textuality.

Medtner's pieces stand out from other more common forms of adaptation because rather than transcoding one form of narrative to another (such as transcoding Telling → Showing), Medtner transcodes a form of verbal telling to musical telling. Also, in contrast to other adaptations, the pieces do not exactly retell the narrative of their source text. Instead, the compositions are descriptive, referencing specific external

factors in Shakespeare's scenes (for example, the storm in *King Lear*) and elaborating on the emotions of particular characters (Ophelia's depression). By studying the pieces as both musical works and Shakespearean adaptation, audience members can gain a more interdisciplinary, and hopefully, a richer and more multi-faceted appreciation of Medtner's *Fairy Tales*.

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